

“Many waters cannot quench love...”

Song of Songs 2:8-13,16a; 8:6-7

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Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Today we're delving into another lesser-known book of ancient Hebrew poetry. But other than the fact that it *is* poetry, it has very little in common with Lamentations, which we read last week. The subject matter, the mood, everything about Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon) is completely different. Like Lamentations, however – though for very different reasons - this book has had its detractors over the years – people who question whether it really belongs in the Bible.

Its full title, translated from Hebrew, is “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s.” Referring to it as “Solomon’s” could mean any number of things – “by Solomon,” “about Solomon,” “dedicated to Solomon,” “in the style of Solomon” or just “Solomon is mentioned here.” We don’t really know, though scholars mostly think it was written a good bit later than the time Israel’s King Solomon lived. Attaching Solomon’s name to the book is a bit misleading for another reason: it obscures the fact that the predominant voice in throughout the book is the voice of a woman – so maybe Song of Songs is the better name.

As for that: in Hebrew to call a song the “song of songs” is to say that it is the best of all songs. (Think about how Jesus is sometimes called “King of kings,” meaning he is the mostly kingly of kings.) In the Bible this particular grammatical construction is mostly used in expressions that refer to God – “Lord of lords,” “Holy of holies.” Because of that, one commentator wondered if perhaps the title is a subtle suggestion that the Song of Songs is the *holiest* or *Godliest* song.

That would be a curious thing, because one of the most unusual things about this book is that it doesn’t mention God at all. Not once. It contains no “word from the Lord,” no commandments, no teaching about the nature of God, no prophetic warnings to repent, no promises or words of comfort for the faithful. Nothing that we’d usually expect in religious or spiritual literature. What we have here is literature of a completely different genre: love poetry. And rather... *suggestive* love poetry at that.

Let me read you just a little bit more, to give you a better sense of it. The book begins with the woman’s voice saying,

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
For your love is better than wine; (1:2)

A bit later, her lover replies:

Ah, you are beautiful, my love;
ah, you are beautiful;

your eyes are doves.
¹⁶ Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved,
Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved,
truly lovely.
Our couch is green; (1:15-16)

The woman has this to say about her beloved:

As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,
so is my beloved among young men.
With great delight I sat in his shadow,
and his fruit was sweet to my taste.
⁴ He brought me to the banqueting house,
and his intention toward me was love.
⁵ Sustain me with raisins,
refresh me with apples,
for I am faint with love.
⁶ O that his left hand were under my head
and that his right hand embraced me! (2:3-6)

A little later she says:

Upon my bed at night
I sought him whom my soul loves;
I sought him but found him not;
I called him, but he gave no answer.^[a]
² "I will rise now and go about the city,
in the streets and in the squares;
I will seek him whom my soul loves."
I sought him but found him not.
³ The sentinels found me,
as they went about in the city.
"Have you seen him whom my soul loves?"
⁴ Scarcely had I passed them,
when I found him whom my soul loves.
I held him and would not let him go

The man says:

You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride;
you have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes,
with one jewel of your necklace.
¹⁰ How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride!
How much better is your love than wine
and the fragrance of your oils than any spice!

¹¹ Your lips distill nectar, my bride;
honey and milk are under your tongue; (4:9-11)

And one more bit from the woman:

I am my beloved's,
and his desire is for me.

¹¹ Come, my beloved,
let us go forth into the fields
and lodge in the villages;

¹² let us go out early to the vineyards;
let us see whether the vines have budded,
whether the grape blossoms have opened
and the pomegranates are in bloom.

There I will give you my love. (7:10-12)

There's more - a lot more. Lush, voluptuous imagery. Bold and emotional language. It's very sensory ... and (undeniably) sexual.

So probably it's not very surprising that historically a lot of the interpretation of this book has treated it as an allegory. Early Jewish rabbis saw the love relationship in the poems as a symbolic representation of the relationship between God and the people of Israel. Later, Christian interpreters viewed it as a picture Christ's love for the church. In medieval times, Song of Songs was beloved in the church as a celebration of the ecstatic, mystical love linking a believer's soul with God. That's not as much of a stretch as you might think; similar metaphors can be found in other parts of both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. Song of Songs is different from most of them, though, in picturing a relationship between a man and a woman that is mutual and equal.

Modern scholarship on Song of Songs generally tends away from the allegorical to recognize that the poetry here is – and was originally – just what it seems to be – love poetry. But it clearly still makes a lot of folks uncomfortable. Many of those who write or preach about this book treat it as sort of a Christian marriage manual... and they take pains to insist that the couple whose voices we hear in the Song are DEFINITELY MARRIED, in spite of the fact that the text doesn't actually say so. The man does refer to the woman as his bride (and sometimes as his sister) — but it is not clear whether they are betrothed or married, and if they are married why she spends so much time looking for him or they sometimes feel the need to sneak around. (Gafney) I do understand why some people might want to take a “morality” approach, but I think that's misguided.

As poetry - understanding genre really does matter! – Song of Songs is a work of art, of imagination and feeling, expressing some things about the human experience that resonate with people across time and culture. It's wrong to try and force a *message* out of it - whether theology or a particular morality – that has little to do with the nature of the text. But poetry by its very nature can have layers of meaning, and I have to agree with Hebrew scholar and

theologian Ellen Davis who believes that it makes sense to consider Song of Songs a celebration of both human love and the divine love that is the source of all love. (p. 68)

I really don't know how you can fail to see that these poems celebrate human sexuality as natural and good and joyful, and the human body as a thing of beauty to cherish and admire. That's different from the messages many believers have taken from the Bible over the years, and you have to wonder how much shame, judgement, and fear (not to mention sexism) might have been avoided if we'd let the voice of this book speak more loudly.

The heart of these poems is the longing that two lovers have for each other. The poems make up a kind of dialogue between a woman and a man (with a few brief sections where groups of friends speak). They sort of tell a story, but it's more dreamlike and impressionistic than a chronological plot you can follow.

The couple express all the excitement of a young love that's still new, still being discovered. There's no doubt about their admiration for one another or the passion they share. The Song celebrates the taste of love and oneness and joy they find with each other.

But parts of the poems suggest that they sometimes lose each other; not everyone around them is supportive; there are obstacles in the path of true love. The Song describes a vision, partly realized, partly hoped for. There is still a sense of anticipation of a future time of togetherness and fulfilment.

One of the things you most notice when reading the Song is the imagery drawn from nature and from growing things. The poet – and the couple – exhibit an intimacy with the natural world that gives them language to express love and admiration. The woman compares her lover to a gazelle, and describes him as being like “an apple tree among the trees of the wood.” He calls her a “lily among brambles” and compares her hair to a flock of goats (which I guess we just have to accept is a compliment!)

The vision of love we get in these poems is one in which the harmony between the two lovers is part of a larger harmony - shalom - that pervades the whole of creation. God may not be mentioned explicitly in this book, but it isn't hard to sense God's presence in the vitality of the natural world and the desire for connection that permeate the Song.

In chapter 4, the image of a garden evokes the lushness and richness of the relationship between the two lovers. It's a walled garden – like you might see in a medieval tapestry, with a fountain and sweet-smelling plants - fruit trees and herbs and flowers. The poem mentions “an orchard of pomegranates, with all choicest fruits, ... henna ... nard and saffron, sweet flag, cinnamon, ... trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, ... spices.” This is a place that would give pleasure to anyone who spent time there, and provide something to eat if you were hungry. A serene, restful place. But the image of a walled garden suggests security, too – safety and protection.

Here's an interesting thing, though. It's a fantasy garden. A dream garden. In the real world, pomegranates, saffron, cinnamon, aloes, and the other plants mentioned aren't likely to be found in the same garden. There's no place in the world where all these plants grow.

What's this all about? I believe this dream-vision of love is looking back to the Garden of Eden, to that time in the mythic and distant past when not only man and woman, but all the disparate parts of the creation lived together in unity and harmony and perfect love... and knew an intimate, joyful connection with God as well.

We don't actually *remember* any such time, but we know what God's intention for us and for the world was (and is), and we know we've strayed far from it. Very, very occasionally, we get a little taste of what it might be like – as in the Song, for example, or in a nurturing relationship – but more of the time it's hard to see past all that is broken in our world and our lives.

It's hard to imagine a time before the loving companionship of the man and woman was shattered by blame and betrayal, before fear and inequality entered the picture.

It's hard to imagine a time before caring for the earth and making a living from it was a struggle, before the soil was depleted and the rivers polluted, before we had to be as concerned as now have to be about the possibility that we are destroying our planet.

It's hard to imagine that time before God began to seem so far away, before it became so hard to hear God's voice over the noise, before it became so hard to believe in God's love in the midst of horrible suffering.

The brokenness so common in human relationships might seem of little consequence in a world where there is so much war, tyranny, hate, destruction, poverty, and suffering. But brokenness in any relationship isn't inconsequential when you experience it. In fact, it feels like everything in the world has gone wrong, and in a way it has. A broken relationship is one tiny part of a whole in which everything is interconnected. It's the pain and alienation of the world in microcosm. And the world's brokenness is our difficulty with relationship writ large.

Think about how women and children are disproportionately affected by nearly every problem in our world – from poverty to war. Think about how conflict between people and competition for material advantage wreaks havoc on the environment. Think about how quickly and widely a small group can spread hate. Think how abuse or oppression can leave someone feeling abandoned by God.

But think too about how love for a place can spark a commitment to earth care. Think about how learning more about an issue helps us have more compassion for an individual affected by it. Think about how another person's love for you helps you believe that God loves you also. Think of how often delight in the natural world becomes a path to connecting with the sacred.

The personal and the global are very much connected, two sides of the same coin.

Song of Songs is a vision of healing for brokenness. It envisions a restoration of connection between men and women, between humanity and the earth, between humanity and God.

Ellen Davis asserts that there is healing power in the longing the Song expresses for that wholeness, peace, and love for which we were created. Lose the hope, stop longing for it... and we will never begin to heal our relationships, our disconnect from the earth, and our spiritual longing. But remember that wholeness and relationship are what we were made for... and we can know who and how we are supposed to be.

One of the ancient rabbis actually called the Song of Songs “the Holy of Holies” (comparing it to the holy place in the temple where God’s presence was believed to reside). That seems like an odd way to think about a poem, but maybe it’s not far wrong: this poem is about recalling us to the place where we belong, a place where we can be fully ourselves, a place where we find nurture... a place where we are embraced in the Love that nothing can extinguish, the Love that is the Source of all love... the Love that sets us free to live in love.

Resources:

Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*, 2001

Wil Gaffney, “Commentary on Song of Solomon 2:8-13,” workingpreacher.org, September 2, 2012

Elaine T. James, “Commentary on Song of Solomon 2:8-13,” workingpreacher.org, September 2, 2018